THE NEW LANDSCAPE FOR STUDENT WELL-BEING:
How Prioritizing Safety, Health, and Inclusion Improves Student Success

By Jeffrey Selingo
The coronavirus outbreak has had a dramatic psychological effect on college students, with the face-to-face and residential campus experience turned upside down by distance education. While “learning loss” from online or hybrid courses is getting much of the attention as colleges slowly return to more normal operations, the pandemic’s impact on the broader health and well-being of students is also coming into sharper focus.

An **assessment** of COVID-19’s impact on students by the U.S. Department of Education in June 2021 came to this disheartening conclusion: nearly all students have experienced some challenges to their mental health and well-being during the pandemic. The report found that many students lost access to school-based services and supports, with early research showing disparities based on race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identity, and other factors.

**Figure 1. Incoming College Students and Well-Being**

- **35%** worldwide have a diagnosed mental health condition
- **28%** have experienced a depressive episode at least once in the past year
- **42%** have felt so depressed that it was difficult to function
- **14%** have seriously considered attempting suicide*

* and nearly **1 in 10** has made a plan for ending their life

The findings come as thoughts of self-harm among college students are at their highest level in a decade, with 14 percent reporting having experienced suicidal ideations. In October 2021, officials at UNC-Chapel Hill **canceled classes** and declared a campus-wide “wellness day” after three suicides and one attempt by students in just six weeks. College presidents everywhere are feeling the pressure to do more: Student mental health was their top concern for the fall of 2021, according to an American Council on Education survey, even greater than worries [or uncertainties] about the financial sustainability of their institutions.

The lack of social connections in classes and in extracurricular activities during the pandemic affected students’ well-being and sense of belonging, whether they were learning on campus or remotely. This in turn jeopardizes their academic achievement, retention rates, and career readiness going forward, leaving higher education vulnerable in every critical measure that counts.
The campuses leading this effort among their peers are re-framing safety, well-being, and inclusion as investments rather than obligations.

Now as college and university leaders consider how the student experience needs to be redesigned after the pandemic, they’re looking for new approaches to engage students and make their institutions more welcoming and safer.

The campuses leading this effort among their peers are re-framing safety, well-being, and inclusion as investments rather than obligations. Instead of waiting to react to problems, they are promoting a more positive, proactive culture that prioritizes students’ social and emotional health. And by doing so, academic leaders are not only improving the likelihood of student success, they are ensuring their institutions’ continued fiscal strength in the face of a demographic cliff in the middle of this decade among high-school graduates.

“Those who embrace their campus in a conversation around opportunities rather than conveying that any of this is a burden are putting themselves in a better situation to develop a narrative that is responsive to the culture of their campus,” says Berenecea Johnson Eanes, president of York College, CUNY.
Why Prioritize Student Well-Being?

Most higher education leaders point to decades of campus prevention efforts as proof of the value they place on student well-being. But many of those measures—monitoring alcohol and drug use; reducing sexual assaults and other violent crimes; offering suicide prevention counseling—are not initiatives that institutions take on voluntarily, but instead are required by state or federal law. What’s more, the focus of those mandates is physical safety and they often do little to ensure students’ overall well-being and success.

A growing body of research reveals that when college officials create a culture emphasizing safety, well-being, and inclusion, they enhance both student success and institutional stability. This new philosophy represents a breakthrough in the way higher education approaches managing the overall student experience, says Peter Lake, a law professor and director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University.

“We now have evidence that shows a little bit of effort directed at prevention—and safety, well-being, and inclusion—really pays off on the very things that are mission critical for a modern institution of higher education,” he says.

My research identified three pillars critical to institutional success that all start with a culture prioritizing safety, well-being, and inclusion.

PILLAR 1: ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Students fail to perform at their best academically when they feel unsafe. Survey data from Vector Solutions’ Campus Prevention Network found that survivors of sexual assault are one-and-a-half times more likely to fall behind in their courses and two times more likely to miss class. Depression or anxiety can cost students as much as a half-point on their grade point averages, which could jeopardize their prospects for graduate school or employment. Students of color report experiencing hostility and microaggressions, especially from intoxicated peers, impacting their sense of safety, academic experience, and overall belonging.

Conversely, the Campus Prevention Network found that participants in prevention programs are 52 percent more likely to feel valued in the classroom, 57 percent more likely to report that they’re happy at their college or university, and 62 percent more likely to feel like they belong at their campus compared to students who did not participate in these programs.
A safer, inclusive campus fosters higher performing students who graduate at higher rates and achieve more success once their college experiences end.

**Figure 3. Mental Health Challenges Have a Substantial Impact on GPA and Completion**

Students with mental health challenges are **TWICE AS LIKELY** to leave without graduating.

Among students with low GPAs, **25%** of those with a mental health problem dropped out, compared to **10%** of those who did not.

- **-0.20 GPA**
- **-0.48 GPA**

50% of students have felt overwhelming anxiety, making it hard to succeed academically.

Sources: The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy; Psychiatric Services

**PILLAR 2: ENROLLMENT AND RETENTION**

Members of Gen Z—born since the mid-1990s and in college now and through the rest of this decade—are among the most socially conscious, inclusive-minded generations in modern history. They expect their colleges and universities to share their values. Gen Z wants a higher education experience that prioritizes their emotional safety and well-being and reflects their commitment to equity and inclusivity.

**Figure 4. A Focus on Well-Being and Safety Shows Results in Enrollment and Retention**

| High-profile scandals result in a **10% DECLINE IN APPLICATIONS.** | Alcohol prevention quality accounts for **14%** of the variance in first-year RETENTION RATES; sexual assault prevention quality accounts for **20%** of the variance |

Sources: Harvard Business School; The Campus Prevention Network

The Campus Prevention Network collected data from 5,000 high school seniors about the role safety, well-being, and inclusion played in their post-secondary decisions. About 82 percent said those three factors were as important as academic rigor when choosing a college.
For institutions that fail to meet their expectations around issues like sexual assault, harassment, hazing, or discrimination, the decline in applications is equivalent to a drop of ten spots in the U.S. News & World Report rankings.

“We seem to believe that all students are alike, and that if we design a system that will attract the ideal student, then that’s what everyone else should want,” says Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College. “What we’re beginning to see is that the people who create systems that communicate to students ‘I see you and I hear you and I respect you’ are poised to do really well going forward.”

An institution’s engagement in emotional safety and well-being also determines whether students stay enrolled. The Healthy Minds Network estimates that a mental health program reaching 500 more students experiencing depression could generate roughly $1 million in additional tuition revenue by averting attrition. Furthermore, institutions that achieve the Campus Prevention Network Seal of Prevention, which is awarded to those that have demonstrated an exemplary commitment to digital prevention programs tied to student safety, well-being, and inclusion, have a first-year retention rate that is nearly 15 percent higher than those institutions that did not achieve this distinction.

**PILLAR 3: CAREER READINESS**

Today’s employers are increasingly struggling to find workers with emotional intelligence, problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills, empathy, and other competencies that correlate with career success and advancement. Programs in college related to safety, well-being, and inclusion help students develop skills valued by hiring managers.

Institutions that prioritize social-emotional well-being not only produce more conscientious, inclusive citizens, they help boost productivity in the workforce. Serious mental illness contributes to $193 billion in lost earnings per year, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Employers also recognize that issues like harassment, discrimination, or substance misuse cost them millions in employee retention and output.

As a result, safety, well-being, and inclusion programs should be positioned as part of the investment a campus is making to prepare students to get a good job and be successful in the workplace. Indeed, 59 percent of students who completed Vector Solutions’ AlcoholEdu for College program said they felt better qualified and prepared for future jobs.

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Creating the Culture

Based on my research, there are several important actions college leaders and governing boards should consider to promote wellness and social-emotional health in order to improve retention and graduation rates—and ultimately improve the student experience.

1 Make a financial commitment to safety, well-being, and inclusion.

According to research from the Campus Prevention Network, institutions doing the most advanced prevention work spend $14.44 per student on sexual assault prevention programs, which is three times greater than other institutions. Advanced institutions also hire twice as many full-time equivalent staff members for those prevention programs as other institutions.

2 Provide more than just programming around safety and well-being.

Programming, whether online or in-person, is just one component of a college or university’s strategy. The culture must be reinforced by creating campus environments that promote these values. Doing so requires strong and consistently enforced policies, institutional buy-in from leaders and key stakeholders, such as students and alumni, as well as critical processes like strategic planning and assessment.

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3 Demonstrate that inclusion is apolitical.

On any given campus, the political climate plays a role in the concept of inclusion - respecting the beliefs that people hold and valuing their right to give voice to them. The process is so integral to the higher education experience that intellectual development suffers in its absence, according to the Rev. Peter Donohue, OSA, PhD, president of Villanova University.

“Academic rigor calls for a dialogue to take place, a dialogue between faculty and student,” he says. “The faculty can learn as much from the student as the student from the faculty. But that conversation has to exist.”

That’s why efforts to promote safety, well-being, and inclusion must be “completely apolitical,” says Lake of Stetson University.

“Wherever you are on the political spectrum, this work benefits you, perhaps in different ways,” he says. “Inclusion isn’t a particular vision of inclusion; it needs to include variety. This isn’t mollicity. This is good business that everyone deserves. If you’re shoving a certain vision of safety or inclusion down someone’s throat, you’re going to drive them away.”

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Despite the weight Generation Z gives to safety, well-being, and inclusion during the college selection process, most institutions fail to provide visibility around programs and services related to these issues. Data from the Campus Prevention Network shows that 40 percent of students struggle to find information about campus programs, policies, and procedures in these areas. Another Campus Prevention Network survey revealed that more than half of college presidents spoke publicly about issues like sexual assault just once or not at all over the course of a year.

However, nearly two-thirds of presidents at leading prevention institutions spoke publicly about these issues at least three times in 12 months. In other words, colleges and universities distinguish themselves by confronting these issues, not avoiding them.

“It’s working for us because students are more comfortable talking about these issues and faculty are confronting it as well,” says James Troha, president of Juniata College. “The peer-to-peer work that is being done on our campus is critical and extraordinary. Our students are calling out the behavior and wanting the resources to confront it. From a strategy standpoint, it helps us.”

College, he says, should be a place where the well-being of the whole person is realized—spiritually, emotionally, financially, and academically. If leaders are just talking about their state-of-the-art buildings, campus traditions, and family-friendly atmosphere, they’re woefully behind the times. “All of that,” Troha says, “is 40 years old now.”

Continually stress the institutions commitment to wellness and prevention.
The Final Word

Many college officials believe that the 2020-21 academic year was an outlier in enrollment and retention and that once the pandemic is in the rear-view mirror the numbers will return to their historical form. Even if that’s the case, retention and graduation rates in higher education as a whole were flat before the pandemic, and many institutions were struggling to recruit and keep underrepresented students who in the coming years will make up a larger proportion of the student body.

Given the demographic and generational changes coming to college campuses, a commitment to safety, well-being, and inclusion can drive outcomes on higher education’s greatest challenges—from enrollment and academic performance to retention and career readiness. Investing in a culture of social-emotional wellness is both the right move and the smart move for colleges and universities. It’s essential for institutions intent on driving the next chapter in student success and guaranteeing that they both survive and thrive in the decade ahead.

About the Author

Jeffrey Selingo has written about higher education for more than two decades. He is the author of four books on higher education; the latest, Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions (2020). He is co-host of the podcast, Future U., and editor of the higher education newsletter, Next. You can find out more about him at jeffselingo.com.

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